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ABSTRACT

A total of 128 recently separated mothers and their children were interviewed and completed a number of adjustment measures. Mothers' work situation was assessed according to two variables: time at work and job level. Number of years of education was used as a predictor of mothers' work situation. Mothers' adjustment was assessed in terms of life satisfaction, mood disturbance, and stress symptoms. Children's adjustment was assessed using two indicators: negative affect and guilt. Children's post-separation adjustment was found to be related to their mothers' adjustment rather than to their mothers' work situation. Mothers' adjustment was related to job level but not to the amount of time spent at work. (Relationships among these variables are discussed.) (Author/RH)

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Maternal Employment Patterns and Mothers' and Children's Post-separation Adjustment

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Abstract

One hundred twenty-eight recently separated mothers and their children were interviewed and completed a number of adjustment measures. Children's post-separation adjustment was found to be related to their mothers' adjustment rather than to the mothers' work situation. Mothers' adjustment was related to their job level, but not to the amount of time they spent at work. The relationship among these variables is discussed.

Introduction

The effects of maternal employment on custodial mothers' and their children's post-separation adjustment have been debated with inconclusive results. Some researchers have found that working benefits mothers in the post-separation period by providing social contacts (Raschke, 1977) and a sense of control over their lives (Bould, 1977). Others, however, have suggested that many women are forced to begin working during the post-separation period, and that this is a source of added stress for both mothers and children (Brandwein, Brown, & Fox, 1974). Hetherington (1979) has also suggested that children whose mothers begin working as a result of marital separation may develop problems due to the simultaneous loss of both parents, despite beneficial effects of working to the mothers. On the other hand, Kurdek and Berg (1983) found that children's adjustment to divorce was not related to loss of time with the custodial mother. Instead, they found a relationship between children's adjustment to divorce and the adjustment of their custodial parent, a relationship also found by other researchers (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Hetherington, 1979). Thus, it seems possible that mothers' employment may affect children only indirectly, through its effect on the mothers' adjustment.

The maternal employment literature suggests that it is not employment per se, or the amount of time spent at work, that affects mothers and children, but other factors such as mothers' satisfaction with their work and parenting roles (Farel, 1980; Etaugh, 1974) and their commitment to work (Baruch & Barnett, 1980). In the present study, we were interested in clarifying the relationship among mothers' work situation, their own adjustment, and their children's adjustment during the post-separation period. More specifically, we hypothesized that:

1) children's post-separation adjustment would be related to their mother's adjustment and not to the amount of time the mothers spent at work. Because of the benefits in terms of psychological and financial rewards usually associated with higher status jobs, we also expected that:

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2) mothers' job level would be a more important predictor of mothers' adjustment than the amount of time spent at work. This further suggested to us the possibility of a causal sequence in the relationship of these three variables--mothers' job level, mothers' adjustment, and children's adjustment. Thus we hypothesized that:

3) mothers' job level (but not their time at work) is a predictor of mothers' adjustment, which in turn is a predictor of children's adaptation.

Sample

The sample consists of 128 recently separated women with at least one child between the ages of six and 12 living with them. Subjects are a non-clinical sample recruited through the divorce dockets of the greater Boston area. Although there is a wide range of income, most subjects fall into the lower-middle to middle class range. All subjects are white. The sample of children is comprised of one child between the ages of six and 12 from each family randomly chosen as the target child for the family. There are 62 females and 66 males in this group. All mothers and their children were interviewed separately no later than 8 months after the parents had filed for divorce. Mothers were also mailed a set of questionnaires which they completed at home and brought with them to the interview.

Interestingly, although much literature has been devoted to the problem of recently separated women being forced into the job market, only 15 mothers in our sample, or 12%, increased their workforce participation during the post-separation period. Thus we were unable to address the issue of the possible negative effects of change in work status on divorcing women.

Variables

Mothers' work situation was assessed using two variables:

Time at work, that is, the amount of time spent at work, was measured using a 3-point scale, where 5 hours or less per week was considered "none," 6 to 29 hours per week were considered "part-time," and 30 hours or more were considered "full-time."

Job level was measured using a 6-point scale adapted from that used by Hollingshead and Redlich (1958), ranging from "unskilled" to "minor professional" (there were no major professionals in our sample).

We also included mothers' years of education as a predictor of their work situation.

Mothers' adjustment was assessed in three different ways:

Life satisfaction was measured using a questionnaire item which asked, "In general, how satisfied are you with the way you are spending your life these days?" Mothers responded on a 4-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "very satisfied."

Mood disturbance was measured by the Profile of Mood States (McNair, Lorr, & Droppleman, 1971), an adjective self-rating scale which measures six dimensions of mood (tension-anxiety, depression-dejection, anger-hostility, fatigue-intertia, confusion-bewilderment, vigor-activity). A total mood disturbance score was obtained by summing scores across the various dimensions.

Stress symptoms were measured using an adapted version of the measure used by Gurin, Veroff, and Feld (1960) in their national survey of mental health (see also Veroff, Kulka, & Douvan, 1981). An overall index of stress symptomatology was generated by summing across items.

Children's adjustment was assessed using two indicators:

Negative affect was measured from interviews with the children. Children were asked to describe their emotional reactions to their parents' separation and were also asked how often they felt specific emotions about the separation (a lot, a little, or not at all). A total negative affect score was created by combining the open- and closed-ended responses for anger, confusion, sadness, and guilt.

Guilt was measured separately as a subscale of the negative affect score. Children indicated a feeling a guilt by expressing the belief that their parents' separation was their fault. We reasoned that guilt was a clearer indicator of poor adjustment than negative affect, since it is arguable that some negative affect is normal or even desirable during the post-separation period, while guilt has been found to be more problematic (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Results

1) We found that neither mothers' time at work nor their job level was directly related to children's negative affect; the correlations were .07 and -.05 respectively. Results were similar for children's guilt. However, mothers' life satisfaction was negatively related to children's negative affect ($r=.23$, $p<.05$) and guilt ($r=.21$, $p<.05$). Mothers' mood disturbance and stress symptoms were also negatively related to children's negative affect and guilt (see Table 1 for the correlations of these variables)

2) Mothers' time at work was also not related to their own adjustment. However, there was a significant relationship ($r=.25$, $p<.05$) between mothers' job level and their life satisfaction score. Similar relationships were found between job level and the other two measures of mothers' adjustment, mood disturbance and stress symptoms, although these correlations were not as strong (see Table 2).

3) These results suggested that there may in fact be an indirect link between mothers' job level and children's adaptation in the post-separation period. Although mothers' job level does not directly predict children's adjustment, it does significantly relate to mothers' own adjustment, which in turn relates to children's adjustment. Logically, it seems possible that mothers' job level (which may indicate level of career commitment and/or job satisfaction as well as provide greater financial and psychological rewards) would affect mothers' feelings of satisfaction. Correspondingly, children's feelings in the post-separation period would naturally be affected by their mothers' emotional state.

To assess the degree to which this hypothesized sequence described our data, we performed a path analysis with mothers' job level as a predictor of their life satisfaction scores and then mothers' life satisfaction as a predictor of children's negative affect. In addition, it seemed obvious to us that the number of years of education completed by the mothers would have a strong impact on their current job level. In fact, the correlation between these two variables for our sample was .63 ($p<.001$). Consequently, a fourth variable, mothers' education, was added to the path analysis, as a predictor of job level.

As Figure 1 shows, the results clearly support our hypothesis. Level of education is strongly related to job level which is significantly related to mothers' life satisfaction. The life satisfaction score, in turn, is negatively related to children's negative affect, while none of the other variables specifically relate

to children's negative affect. Thus, mothers' educational background and work situation variables are only important for children's divorce adjustment to the extent that these variables influence mothers' adjustment.

Although these results do support our hypothesis of a sequential relationship between mothers' job level and mothers' and children's adjustment, other interpretations of the pattern may be possible. To test this, we performed a series of path analyses using the other employment and adjustment variables. Thus, we replaced life satisfaction with both mood disturbance and stress symptoms; guilt was also substituted as the child adjustment variable (see Figure 1). Each analysis produced results similar to the original path analysis. However, as might be predicted, the sequence of relationships did not hold when time at work was substituted for job level (see Figure 2). In addition, alternative causal sequences (e.g., reversing the order of the mother and child adjustment variables) did not yield significant path analyses.

Conclusions

Two major points can be concluded from our results. First, it seems clear that it is not so much mothers' employment, but rather their emotional state in the post-separation period, which most directly affects children's adaptation to the new situation. Second, it is the mothers' level or type of employment, rather than the amount of time they spend at work, which most significantly affects their own adjustment. Thus, in terms of maternal employment, the best predictor of mothers', and indirectly, children's adjustment after marital separation seems to be the level of the mother's job. Jobs which, logically, provide women with a greater sense of self-esteem and accomplishment are most beneficial to mothers and their chidlren. And as the data clearly show, the way to higher levels of employment is through education.

It should also be noted that although change in employment status, particularly entering the job market, has been reported to be a significant factor in both mothers' and children's adaptation in the post-separation period, too few of our sample fit this category to make any analysis of this issue possible. In fact, 80% or our sample were working prior to their separation and continued working afterwards. If our sample is truly representative, as we believe it is, these demographics may be reflecting the increasing trend for most mothers, regardless of marital status, to be employed. Thus, rather than focusing our attention on problems of divorcing mothers which are no longer salient, a more useful purpose could be served by addressing the more relevant needs of these women, such as the needs for satisfying employment opportunities and adequate child care.

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Table 1

Correlations of Mother Adjustment Variables with Child Adjustment Variables

	Mother Variables		
	Life Satisfaction (N=106)	Mood Disturbance (N=111)	Symptoms (N=110)
Child Variables:			
Negative Affect	-.23*	.22*	.26**
Guilt	-.21*	.23*	.25**

*p<.05
**p<.01

Table 2

Correlations of Mother Employment Variables with Mother and Child Adjustment Variables

	Education Level (N=128)	Time at Work (N=115)	Job Level (N=95)
Mother Variables:			
Life Satisfaction	.16	-.08	.25*
Mood Disturbance	-.09	-.08	-.17[b]
Symptoms	-.24*	-.07	-.20[a]
Child Variables:			
Negative Affect	-.07	.07	-.05
Guilt	.04	.05	-.05

*p<.05
[a]p<.06
[b]p<.10

Figure 1

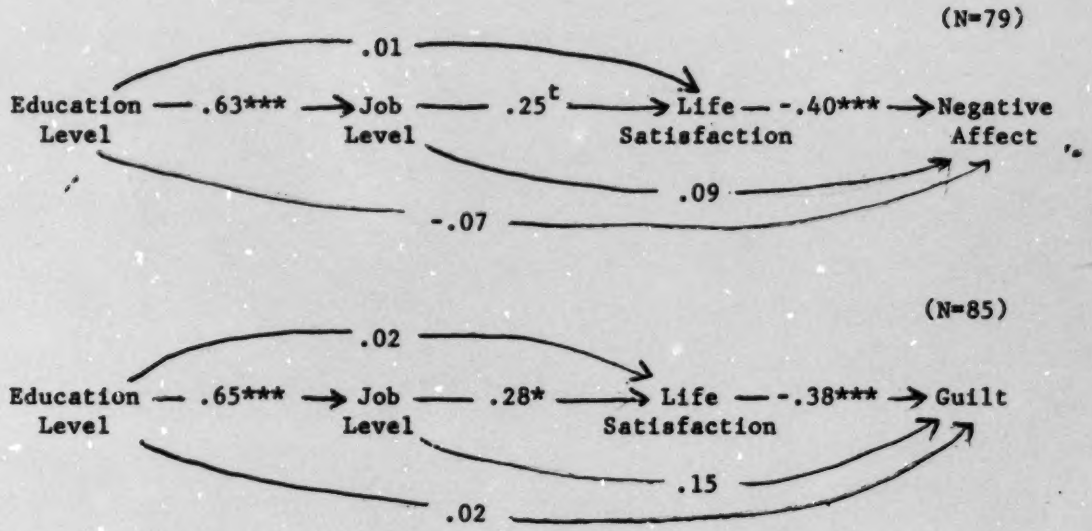
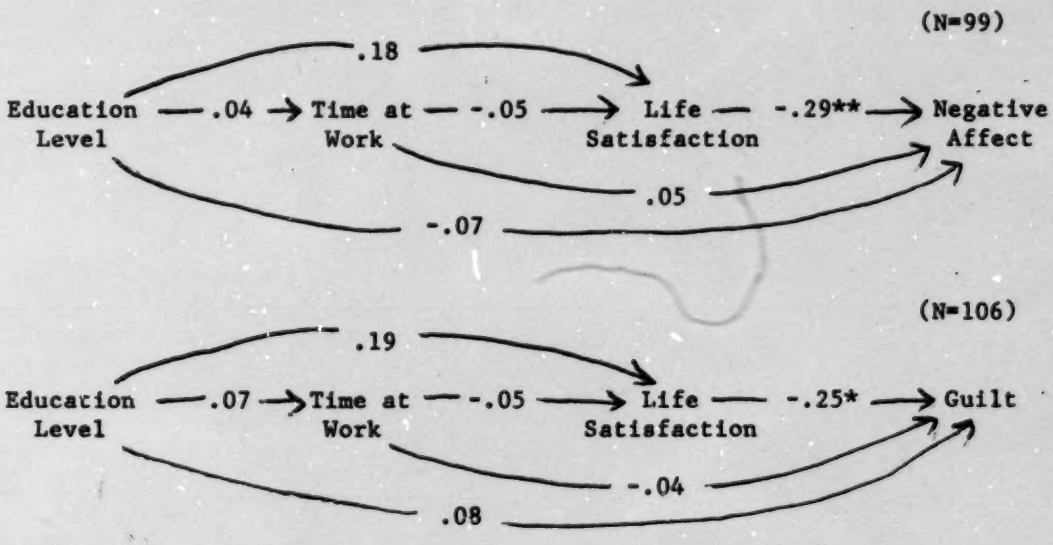


Figure 2



***p<.001
**p<.01
*p<.05
t p=.06

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